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The Peculiar Institution:

The Depiction of Slavery in Steven Barnes's *Lion's Blood* and *Zulu Heart*

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The term “peculiar institution” is taken from Kenneth Stamp’s book, “*The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the ante-bellum South*” where the term is a euphemism for slavery. It was primarily used during the 19th century when the word slavery was deemed “improper” and was actually banned in certain areas.”

Steven Barnes’ two novels, *Lions Blood* and *Zulu Heart* that comprise his Insha’Allah (If God Wills) series, represent a unique perspective on the *peculiar institution* of slavery written within the genre of science fiction. The stories offer an alternative universe where the Africans and other people of color are the slaveholders and Europeans are the slaves. Set in the Antebellum South, now called Bilalistan, which mirrors what was considered ancient Africa (Ethiopia/Egypt), with the inhabitants as pawn in an ongoing succession of battles between Egypt’s Pharaoh and Ethiopia’s Empress for control of economic wealth. This emulates the conflict between the Confederate and Union states prior to and during the Civil War. This alternative universe is an important aspect of these stories, but the overriding feature that provides a unique spin is that it is the religion of Islam that anchors them and it is primarily Muslims who are the lead characters of the novels. Throughout these narratives it is the Islamic

perspective and the tenets of the faith that are discussed, questioned, critiqued, and explained as they relate to the system of slavery. In a recent interview posted on the *Islam and Science Fiction* website, Barnes was asked why he set his story within an Islamic framework; his response was “I wanted to explore the nature of slavery, and to create a world in which Africa developed a technological civilization prior to Europe. To do that, I needed a unifying religion, and Islam fit the bill.” Concurrently, the story takes pains to paint the Islamic form of slavery as more humane. Barnes notes in the Islam and Science Fiction interview, “slavery in my world is a mite kinder: the Irish kept their names and were allowed to keep their religions, for instance.”

The story focuses on one of the most prosperous plantations within Bilalistan, a place called Dar Kush (actual meanings of Dar is Home and Kush represents the Kingdom of *Kush*, an ancient nation in northeastern Africa comprising large areas within present-day Egypt and Sudan) that is ruled by a Muslim family led by the Wakil (a senator) Abu Ali (in *Lion's Blood*), who has two sons Ali and Kai, and a daughter Elenya. The sequel *Zulu Heart* follows Kai's tenure as Wakil of Dar Kush. Barnes' other main character, his “Frederick Douglass” character, is the European slave and childhood friend of Kai's Aidan O'Dere, who along with Babatunde, Dar Kush's resident Sufi, become the voice of conscience in the story. Modeling his stories on slavery in Islam, Barnes attempts to show that Abu Ali and his son Kai, although not color blind, rarely saw the race of the individuals as the reason for their enslavement nor did they see others as inferior or without humanity, unlike many slave holders within the Americas who saw the color of Black Africans as reasons for enslavement. Historian Michael Gomez in his book *Reversing Sails* notes that “Muslim societies made use of slaves from all over the reachable world. Europeans were just as eligible as Africans, and Slavic and Caucasian populations were the largest source of slaves for the Islamic world well into the eighteenth century.”

The slaves on Dar Kush are treated well, families remain intact, and not only are they allowed to practice their religion, the plantation maintains a grove that the slaves use as their sacred ground. Barnes pushes this “so called” humane characteristic throughout the storylines and emphasizes that Islam’s view of slavery was not race based nor was it an impediment to advancement within society. Historian Ali Mazrui notes that Islamic forms of slavery permitted the highest degree of upward social mobility historically from serf to sultan.” (pg 265) He continues, “...the Islamic system was creed-conscious, and the indigenous system was culture-conscious, the Western system was race-conscious in the extreme.” (pg 265) Barnes does not attempt to minimize the viciousness of bondage, race and racism are in the story; the brutality and dehumanizing features are all there, but it is the framing of the storyline from an Islamic perspective, where religion impacts your status and station in the world, again the alternate story, that it is the religion of Islam rather than Christianity that dominates the discourse. The stories also relate their uneasy alliances with the Zulus, Egyptians, Abyssinians, Aztecs, Vikings and Indians. These alliances have been forged through wars of conquest, marriage, and support for the institution of slavery.

Throughout the telling of these stories there is the alternative recreation of the institution of slavery within the US, often in stark detail and also in small subtle ways, such as the discovery of an underground railroad run by Muslims, Jews, and Christians that helps slaves escape to non-slave holding states in the North. It is through their interactions that we view slavery and how each group views the other. As Kai and Aidan mature they discuss the need to abolish slavery, the humanity of whites, and the religion of Islam and Christianity; they speak on a level as equals. Aidan forces Kai to understand what slavery does to people who are enslaved and to the slave owners, speeches that could have come from the mouth of Frederick Douglass or any anti-

slavery advocate. His views on Islam mirror Douglass's statements on Christianity of slave traders. Aidan, Kai, and Babatunde's characters recreate many of the discussions and debates regarding the legitimacy, ethical and moral aspects of slavery and the slave trade that were ongoing within the Muslim and non Muslim communities in this alternative world and mirror the debates that occurred in the Americas. Their discussions channel the words of many of the very arguments spoken by abolitionists, pro-slavery figures, and former slaves. A vivid example is when Aidan challenges Kai on what Islam teaches about the humanity of everyone, justice and equality. He constantly challenges Kai's belief in God, "...I can understand how you can believe in God. After all, His light shines upon you and all your people as well. But fate has brought me little save misery..." For Aidan there are no benefits of religion, even after he and many of his fellow slaves have won their freedom. The people of Aidan's village continue to struggle to find their place in this world, and ponder how or if they will ever recover their culture and establish communities that can prosper in a black dominated world. These are questions that are left unanswered in Barnes's stories that leave one anticipating and anxious for the next chapter in this series.

Why science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction and what can it offer in terms of "new approaches to the study of African American Islam?" Speculative fiction offers opportunities for exploring themes within the human condition that allows others to "walk a mile in my shoes" without judgment. Science fiction provides for the telling of stories from perspectives that confront our assumptions, stereotypes, and push for a new dialogue about race, privilege and power. Fantasy literature, similar to its sister literature of science fiction, can engage an audience with its use of imagination, nightmares, and dreams as its foundation. The unexplainable and the impossible are the devices of fantasy literature. Barnes's stories straddle

these two forms of literature, employing them in ways that force us to rethink common held beliefs, to think critically about slavery that makes us uncomfortable, and to question the long term impact of the slavery, the systemic effects of the *peculiar institution*.

Similar to the powerful scene in the film “A Time to Kill” when Samuel Jackson’s whose daughter has been brutally raped, sums it up in his conversation with his white lawyer, “See Jake? You’re one of them, don’t you see? My life in white hands...jury and judge. He asks, what would it take to convince YOU to set me free”. In Jake’s summation to the jury he tells them to “close their eyes and as he narrates the horrific details, he ends by telling them “Now, imagine she’s white. The verdict comes back not guilty.” It is that reversal of roles that makes the jury understand and empathize with the Black defendant. Barnes has captured this scene throughout *Lion’s Blood* and *Zulu Heart* that forces the reader to imagine the alternative world, these role reversals, and how our 21st century notions of slavery are challenged. These words could have been spoken by Aidan in Barnes’s novels as we read about Kai and Aidan’s lives and their growing friendship that forces them to confront and challenge the reader’s assumptions about the system of slavery.

Another feature of Barnes’ novels is his depiction of gender issues, Muslim and non-Muslim in both stories through the use of female secondary characters. The women represent composites of the wives of the Prophet (pbuh), especially his marriages to bridge differences and create filial bonds. Kai has two wives Lamiya, an Abyssinian princess originally destined to marry Kai’s brother until he was killed, who refuses to forgo a life of solitude, and rebels against the Empress and marries Kai. His other wife, Nandi is a Zulu princess who was destined to be his first wife, but resented having to marry him as his second; their marriage unites the Muslims and the Zulus creating an allegiance to the Wakil. The Zulu’s hatred towards the Muslims forced

underground where they work to undermine the Wakil with the hopes of removing him, but almost causes the death of Nandi.

Kai's younger sister Elenya was depicted as an independent and strong woman capable of speaking her mind and using her intellect. Her story was left unfinished after she was taken hostage by the Pharaoh. Sofia, the wife of Aidan is representative of the precarious condition women held in the society and in the institution of slavery. She was originally just a sexual companion for Kai without any status as a slave or wife; she eventually chooses to marry Aidan and in turn chooses to become a slave. When Sofia is taken from him and repeatedly raped by her owner, the emotions are similar to the reality of slave women in the U.S. Aidan's sister Nessa is another of those slave stories that were common, where slave holders developed an attachment to their slave women, having children with them, and providing them the status of wives without the legal and formal recognition. These tragic figures will have you rooting for the death of the slave masters who are black and for the success of the slave uprising led by whites offering a vivid demonstration that power and privilege are the elements that undergird society, at least in this story. For the people of Aidan's tribe these are the two elements that must be examined and changed before progress towards true equality is achieved.

The most interesting female character was only introduced in the second novel *Zulu Heart*. Chifi Kokossa, (Islam's Sumiya, the 1st martyr in Islam) was the daughter of a respected friend and companion who was murdered by one of Kai's enemies. He had begun the development of what is described as a submarine, but we find out that it is really Chifi's invention. When she tries to get support for building the model and to prepare for war she runs up against male chauvinism in the Senate. Kai decides to support her work and it is her submarine along with the help of two Dahomey women and Aidan that saves Bilalistan from an

attack by the Pharaoh's fleet. Her arguments with Kai are classic feminist discussions and she too pushes him to expand his ideas on the status of women and religion. After being turned down and ridiculed by the Senate she says to Kai, "I came here not for myself, but for you. For you to see the reality I have faced every day of my life. You operate under the illusion that men hold the power for the protection of women. As you probably were raised thinking that slavery was good for the slaves." Chifi's fate is another unfinished story and hopefully Barnes will continue her character in any future stories. These women show the diversity of women within the Islamic tradition and how the peculiar institution of slavery impacts all within that society.

It is certainly true that Barnes doesn't want to idealize Islam and Muslims. Not all of the Muslims were portrayed as "thoughtful"; some were brutal, cruel, filled with hate and disdain for the slaves. Kai's father was considered a just master, but his brother Ali and his uncle Malik were of the typical stock of many slave holders, with very little concern for their slaves, often cruel and thought nothing of selling away a loved one or beating slaves for small or minor offenses. Steven Barnes's two novels show the complexities of slavery. The enduring struggle of a people to chart their own destiny, both black and white while attempting to answer the questions that are always beneath the surface; will Dar Kush and Bilalistan continue as slave holding lands, will the whites continue to be used as slaves and soldiers in never ending wars, and finally what will happen to Kai and Aidan in their fight for the abolition of slavery? We know that Kai is leaning towards fighting for the abolition and we know that he seeks to prevent more wars, but he also knows that to achieve these goals will require that he will be fighting traditions that are institutionalized and systemic. The novels emphasize the institution of slavery but one cannot separate the theory of oppression from race and racism. How do we respond to the same argument and fate of enslaved Europeans when the roles are reversed; issues the novel

forces the reader to ponder. Is the response similar when the culture that has capital is Black and the dominant ideology is Islamic? Again, we wonder if rooting for the death of the slave masters who are black and for the success of the slave uprising led by whites is only a matter of the powerless vs the powerful; what determines our reaction? The inhumanity of watching women being ripped from their husbands, raped, prostituted, men being beaten from speaking, touching or just looking at a slave master or a black woman, produces similar reactions from our own history of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade. Barnes uses all of these elements to frame his story and force us to react in ways that are difficult and foreign. The genius of Barnes's novels is that for readers ignorant of the long term impact of slavery, the stories open a vivid window into the struggles, pain, and suffering that enslaved Africans endured. The stories provide insight into the vestiges of slavery and the inequality that becomes systemic. The stories force you to confront the notion of rooting for these enslaved and brutalized people without regard to their race; these are difficult and often jarring emotions that the reader will constantly experience reading these two novels. The novels also present an Islam that is nuanced and not monolithic, a faith that is told from an African perspective, a viewpoint that many will find revelatory and remarkable for the accuracy and effort that Barnes sought to portray. Finally, as we read these stories by Steven Barnes, he repeatedly challenges us to think about these issues that make us uncomfortable and question deeply held beliefs, stereotypes, and prejudices.

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